

Towards a Comprehensive Plan

The following article summarizes a planning process that is being conducted through a partnership agreement among the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, and the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission. This agreement, supported by federal and non-federal funding, will lead to a feasibility study, the outline of which is now being formulated under a Project Management Plan. The feasibility study will provide the foundation toward the development of a Comprehensive Restoration Implementation Plan.

*Leonard Houston, Chief, Environmental Resources Branch,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, Planning Division*

In April 1999, the House of Representatives passed a resolution directing the Corps of Engineers to investigate the potential for environmental restoration in the Port of New York / New Jersey. Then in June 2000, the Corps' New York District (District) issued a reconnaissance report that demonstrated a strong federal interest in environmental restoration within the Port District and called for a detailed feasibility study of environmental restoration within the entire Hudson-Raritan Estuary (HRE). This report recommended developing a Comprehensive Restoration Implementation Plan (CRIP) that would use an ecosystem approach to address the overall restoration needs of the estuary, rather than focusing on individual projects. The report also recommended conducting

smaller sub-basin studies to address areas of special interest or concern which would be linked to the larger plan by the CRIP. At about the same time, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) was holding a series of stakeholder work sessions to garner commitment to help protect the Hackensack Meadowlands. The Meadowlands had already been identified by the EPA's Harbor Estuary Program (HEP) as an area of special concern. The District's reconnaissance study recognized the HEP as having made extensive progress toward a system-wide approach to the HRE, and the CRIP was to become strongly linked with the work of the HEP. Consequently, the District was invited to the Meadowlands workshop held in the

Offices of Representative Steve Rothman, (NJ9th). Congressman Rothman, whose District encompasses the Meadowlands, had made its protection and preservation a priority. At the workshop the Congressman drew a line around the remaining open spaces of the Meadowlands and expressed a desire that those present work together to create a Meadowlands reserve. Of special interest was the approach identified in the HRE reconnaissance report for looking in detail at sub-basins of the larger estuary. The Meadowlands seemed to fill this bill perfectly. However, to use federal funds a non-federal partner was required. Into this role stepped the newly renamed New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (Commission).



The view of the Meadowlands (right of center across the river) from the top of the Empire State Building

Once, under the old name of the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission it was focused on developing the area within environmental guidelines. The Commission is now emerging as a major advocate for land acquisition and restoration.

Three partners have thus been brought together at a very fortuitous time. The Service's New Jersey Field Office has been directed by Congress to assist the District in conducting a feasibility study toward the development of the CRIP and to prepare a comprehensive conservation plan for the Meadowlands. Similarly, the District has been directed by Congress to address the feasibility of environmental restoration within the Port District, including the Meadowlands.

And the Commission has embarked on a new management plan that stresses land acquisition and restoration of the remaining open spaces in the Meadowlands. It's a natural that all three pool their expertise and resources, and concrete progress has been made toward doing just that:

1. The District and the Service have laid out a comprehensive work plan to identify the major problems and their potential solutions.
2. The District and the Commission are also investigating legal and funding mechanisms under which they can form a partnership to pursue the development of a restoration plan for the Meadowlands.

3. Finally, the District, the Service, and the Commission have identified their respective roles and responsibilities in maximizing resources and expediting the planning process.

The District has been working to translate the approach and goals agreed upon into specific tasks, with costs and times to complete each. The approach will identify specific sites for restoration, targeting those that have a greater potential for expanding existing natural tracts or connecting isolated pockets. The end result of this effort will be the Project Management Plan (PMP), essentially a roadmap that will identify what has to be done, who will do the work, and when it will be available. Once approved by the partners, it will be signed by all three as a Memorandum of Agreement and will serve as the basis for the Feasibility Cost Sharing Agreement between the Corps and Commission as well as any future fund transfers between the Corps and the Service.

Much excitement exists within all three agencies as they are poised on the brink of great things for the Meadowlands. In the past these agencies have not always seen eye-to-eye. Now they are setting aside their differences to achieve the common goal. When they succeed, a vibrant urban estuary will have been brought back from further degradation and eventual loss, and a significant commitment to the ecosystem of the region fulfilled. This is government as it should work: building meaningful partnerships.



A view of the Empire State Building from the Hackensack Meadowlands



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